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SUBJECT: FINLAND, SWEDEN AND NORWAY EXPLORE A "NORDIC APPROACH" TO AFGHANISTAN, CHAD AND THE NRF

REF: HELSINKI 715

Classified By: POLCHIEF GREGORY THOME FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: The GOF has begun a series of discussions with Norway and Sweden aimed at developing a "Nordic approach" to security policy that could result in new NATO Response Force (NRF) commitments 2008; in more Nordic-led OMLTs; and in a long-term commitment to staffing the Mazar-al-Shariff ISAF PRT under alternating Finnish-Swedish leadership. In addition, GOF sources say the "Nordic approach" will make it easier to sell difficult operations like Afghanistan to increasingly skeptical public opinion. Downsides may include slower decision making, however, and numerous difficult details remain to be addressed regarding the Mazar PRT. Meanwhile, the Finns are pessimistic about the proposed ESDP Mission to Chad, saying that an EU decision not to deploy a Battle Group will dramatically limit Nordic troop contributions and could jeopardize the whole mission. End Summary.

¶12. (SBU) Finland and Sweden have opened discussions aimed at developing a bilateral approach to the NATO Response Force (NRF) membership and a "Nordic approach" (along with Norway) to crisis management (CM) operations in Afghanistan and Africa. As part of what will likely develop into a series of diplomatic and military conversations, MFA State Secretary Pertti Torstila traveled to Stockholm for discussions with his counterparts Sept. 23 and the Swedish and Finnish MODs met as part of an unofficial meeting of EU Defense Ministers in Portugal Sept. 28-29. This cable is based on informal read-outs from MFA and MOD contacts on those meetings. We understand discussion will expand to include Norway at an Oct. 9 meeting in Oslo.

Nordic Cooperation

¶13. (C) In an era when expensive and difficult operations like Afghanistan are increasingly a priority, the "Nordic approach" concept is emerging as the key to maximizing scarce CM resources, Finnish contacts say. As important, they add, is the fact that a Nordic approach makes it easier for all three governments to sell the tough mission in Afghanistan (and politically sensitive endeavors like joining the NRF) to an increasingly skeptical public. As one official put it, the EU Battle groups require the Nordics to cooperate tactically, but the Afghanistan operation and the closer relationship with NATO are issues that call for joint strategies on the political and public diplomacy levels.

PRTs and OMLTs

¶4. (C) The Finns are particularly hopeful that the Nordic approach will help them do more in Afghanistan -- a goal which is high on the GOF's agenda but has proven politically difficult to implement. When PDAS Kurt Volker visited Finland in mid-September, senior MFA and MOD officials enthusiastically described plans to offer OMLTs in Afghanistan and to take leadership of the ISAF PRT at Mazar-al-Sharif in late 2008 (reftel). Since then, however, many questions -- both political and operational -- have arisen. Torstila's meetings represented the "initial political effort" to negotiate a rotating Finnish-Swedish PRT leadership structure at Mazar-al-Sharif, MFA contacts reported. However, they hastened to add, "much more negotiation needs to occur," especially regarding troop commitments. Sweden currently has 365 troops in Mazar and leads the PRT, while the Finns supply about 90. The Swedes told Torstila that sizeable impending budget cuts will likely result in force reductions at Mazar, but they hoped that the Finnish troop increases that would have to accompany a PRT leadership role could offset Swedish decreases. However, the GOF is currently considering an additional 50 to 60 troops -- a figure Finnish officials readily admit would fall far short of what is necessary to lead the PRT effectively, especially if the Swedes draw down. The 50-60 figure is not set in stone and could well increase, MFA contacts said, and the Swedes did not in any way reject the Finnish idea of rotating PRT leadership. However, there is currently a disconnect and more discussions still obviously need to occur.

¶5. (SBU) As for OMLTs, the Nordic approach offers good possibilities. Finnish Political Director Pilvi-Sisko Vierros Villeneuve had suggested to PDAS Volker that the Finns would offer their own stand-alone OMLT (reftel). However, it appears that the Finnish MOD and MFA now believe that an increase in the number of "Nordic OMLTs" can be even greater if the GOF pools resources with regional partners. Norway and Sweden already operate two OMLTs jointly and, with added Finnish contributions, that number could be increased. MFA sources say Norway has formally "invited" Finland to join OMLT operations as they expand. Our Finnish briefers were unclear at this point as to how many Nordic OMLTs are ultimately planned. However, they were enthusiastic about the possibility of an increase beyond three under shared Nordic leadership.

NRF: A Tougher Sell than Expected

¶6. (C) The Finns are also hopeful that the Nordic security approach will help them sell the concept of NRF participation. Before the previous center-right government left office, Finland's joining the NRF seemed almost a done deal. The then-Foreign Minister (a notorious NATO skeptic) had publicly accepted the idea, and President Halonen also seemed to be on board. Now, however, the new center-right has encountered surprisingly staunch opposition to NRF participation as much from within the coalition as from the opposition. Some Finnish politicians have begun hiding behind the allegation that the NATO Allies are so unclear about the future structure of the NRF that they do not want Partner countries expressing interest at this point. (COMMENT: The Embassy has worked hard to dispel this canard, emphasizing that although the Allies are carefully considering changes to the NRF's structure and deployment guidelines, expressions of interest from Partners are indeed welcome. END COMMENT.)

¶7. (C) MFA and MOD contacts -- who fully support NRF participation -- are very hopeful that as the "Nordic approach" develops, it will serve as a useful tool to undermine rumors and increase political and public

support for the NRF. The key for us is to move forward with our Nordic partners to make this happen, one MFA office director said. Neither country can be held hostage to the other's progress toward full NRF participation, but both Stockholm and Helsinki are hopeful of making a firm commitment either at the April Bucharest NATO Summit or, at the very latest, in time for the November 2008 NATO Force Generation Conference.

The Chad Mission May Stumble

¶8. (C) Separately, the Finns have expressed disappointment that the Nordic EU Battle Group (EUBG) that will stand up Jan. 1 will not be deployed as part of a proposed ESDP mission to Chad. The GOF favored deployment, but consensus in the EU was that the tasks and timetable in Chad did not fit EUBG parameters, MFA contacts reported. Deployment of the BG would have permitted 1000 Swedish forces and some 240 Finns to participate. The EU will now seek to staff the Chad mission via "the usual force generation" mechanisms; however, our disappointed contacts said, budget constraints will likely limit the Swedish contribution to no more than 200, and the Finnish to about 12 police/civilian crisis managers.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) The GOF is encountering domestic uneasiness regarding its ambitious plans to do more in Afghanistan and to join the NRF. As this slow, consensus-building process plays out, we will continue to encourage creative ideas like the "Nordic approach" which do appear to hold promise, both as a way of maximizing Nordic resources and winning over the naysayers. End Comment.

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